

## Making ‘Traditional Food’ – Local Interpretations of a European Protection-System

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The move to protect local products in Hesse began as follows according to an official in the Hessian Department of Quality Protection: ‘The ministry asked if there were food specialties in Hesse. And this was not our area of responsibility, but in the absence of others [who took care of the applying for EU-protection], this is important to point out, it was my private initiative. [...] From the idea to the implementation, I did it on my own, and the manufacturer supported me a little.’<sup>1</sup> This is how Hesse, a federal state in the German mid-west, introduced a cheese specialty – Odenwälder Frühstückskäse – into the EU-protection system of geographical indications. This cheese has the label ‘PDO’ since 1997 due to this initiative.

The ‘protected designation of origin’ (PDO) is the highest protection level in the EU-system of ‘agricultural products and foodstuffs as traditional specialties guaranteed’.<sup>2</sup> The geographical indications provide legal protection for a specific product, which is identified as being ‘traditional’, regionally established, and historically anchored. They give producers in a certain area a common right on a common product, so the protected specialty does not refer to a particular company but to the product’s geographical origin.

Before designating a product as ‘culinary heritage’<sup>3</sup> within the EU-system, it has to be declared worthy of protection. Therefore, local and historical knowledge has to be collected and presented to the EU. Various actors are involved in the processes of initiating the application, and of proving the local origin of the product, all of which involves research and negotiation, as well as the submission of the request and lobbying for its success. As illustrated by the quote above, the European system is put into effect by local actors, such as dairy owners, marketing directors, and regional and national government officials, who shape a transnational network according to subjective interests and initiatives. So the system of geographical indications is neither set nor static. There are people using it, and consequently making it. They are performing, interpreting and selling a product and a practice and, they are, thereby, with reference to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s assertion, creating a metacultural relationship from what was once just habitus.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to come to an understanding of the metacultural processes within this system of protecting, or rather of creating, heritage: Who initiates and influences the application? How do the various actors involved interpret the EU-system? What changes accompany the implementation of geographical indications? These questions are discussed

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<sup>1</sup> Interview at the Hessian Department of Quality Protection in Giessen, 19 April 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 509/2006 (20 March 2006). This revised regulation is based on Council Regulation (EEC) No 2081/92 that was enacted on 14 July 1992. Together, they organise the indication of origin at EU-level. Next to the ‘PDO’, there are the protection levels of ‘protected geographical indication’ (PGI), and ‘traditional specialty guaranteed’ (TSG) whose restrictions on geographical origin are less strict.

<sup>3</sup> In order to clearly define ‘culinary heritage’, cf. Tschofen, Bernhard, ‘Vom Geschmack der Regionen. Kulinarische Praxis, europäische Politik und räumliche Kultur – eine Forschungsskizze’, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 103 (2007): 169-95.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, ‘World Heritage and Cultural Economics’, in Karp, Ivan, Kratz, Corinne A., (eds.), *Museums Frictions. Public Cultures/ Global Transformations*, Durham and London 2006, 161.

using the examples of PDO cheese-making in Germany and Italy, by focusing on the motives and strategies of the different actors, in order to show which processes and effects result from the transformation of a so-called 'traditional food' into a legally secured common property.<sup>5</sup>

### **Motives – Protecting Sales, not Local Knowledge**

In the early 1990s, the Hessian ministry suggested that an attempt be made to have some local product registered as an EU protected speciality. The official at the Hessian department of Quality Protection hesitated before he chose the Odenwälder Frühstückskäse, a 'breakfast-cheese' – a small soft cheese the size of the palm of a hand – from the forest region Odenwald belonging inter alia to Hesse, as a candidate product for the protection scheme. The official pondered whether protection-system and product go together. On the one hand, he considered the cheese to be a perfect example of a product for which protection should be sought, because the entire supply chain was located in the region. He continued: 'And that is what this is all about, that is written in the programme. The point is, the keeping of the entire supply chain and the production in the region.'<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he also somewhat doubted the cheese's suitability for registration because the dairy did not seem to be interested in selling the product beyond the region. For sale within the region, though – as he saw it – neither the sign nor the protection would be of importance. In the early 1990s, and as is also the case today, only one family-owned dairy produced the Odenwälder Frühstückskäse. Founded around 1900, the dairy was handed on from father to son and is run today by a married couple of the family in question. Twenty employees are involved in the manufacture of cheese and dairy goods from the milk supplied to the dairy by twenty local milk farmers – a form of cooperation which has been in existence for many years.

It is quite unusual for a product of a single producer to be labelled as a PDO. The couple did not apply for EU-protection for the cheese of their own accord but were prompted to do so by the aforementioned official: 'He identified our cheese as something special. And we are always so involved in our daily routine, and we are so blessed with the work, that we would not have had the free time and capacity for that bureaucratic procedure. We would have said that it was too much of an effort.'<sup>7</sup> So it was essentially due to the encouragement from the state that the Odenwälder Frühstückskäse applied for and gained a PDO.

In Italy, a different situation presented itself. A dairy company in Belluno, a remote province in the Veneto region, produces the hard cheese called 'Piave', named after a local river. Measuring about thirty centimetres in diameter, it is sold at different maturity levels, mostly in Italy, but also abroad – in the United States, for example. The dairy company in question is the only producer of Piave. But in contrast to the dairy in the Odenwald, it is organised as a co-operative of four hundred milk farmers. Founded in 1954, it currently employs

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<sup>5</sup> This paper is part of a comparative study on four PDO-cheese-specialties in Italy and Germany for which I did interviews with cheese makers, officials of different governmental levels and administration offices, of each of two German and Italian regions, as well as with actors in regional marketing, non-governmental organisations and local food organisations. Embedded in an interdisciplinary research group on cultural property, it focuses on structures of governance and negotiation, and on interests and conflicts, in the transformation process of 'culinary heritage'. Cf. <http://cultural-property.uni-goettingen.de>; accessed 17. 1. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Interview at the Hessian Department of Quality Protection in Giessen, 19 April 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Interview at the dairy in the Odenwald, 18 April 2012.

about one hundred and eighty people. Just two years ago, in May 2010, Piave became protected as a PDO. The co-operative's administration initiated the application some years previously. In an interview, the marketing director stressed that EU-protection was not necessary because Piave was not, in fact, 'endangered', but that the PDO was a useful means of emphasising the high quality of the cheese, and also that the EU-label would be advantageous for sales beyond Belluno.<sup>8</sup>

The views expressed by the actors in Odenwald and Belluno show that each had different motives for wanting to have their cheese specialties labelled as PDO. In the case of the German cheese, the desire was to support the rural areas in question by keeping the supply chain local. With regard to the Italian cheese, the PDO was seen as a means by which to highlight the quality of the product and to increase local and international sales. EU geographical indications are intended to protect the product and production, and to increase visibility and sales. These insights mirror Gisela Welz's observations: 'The regulation of geographical indications does not aim to protect primarily local knowledge but to give clear information to the consumers and to support the rural areas by increasing the farmers' incomes.'<sup>9</sup> These commercial motivations might explain the special state interest as seen in the case of the German cheese. But even if the actors, in the first instance, appear to use the geographical indications as an economic or legal tool, the application for, and the use of, the 'PDO' sets off actions and transformations that reach far beyond this situation.

### **Strategies – Proving the Link between Spatial Origin and Traditional Manufacturing**

The most difficult part of a successful application for geographical indications is the proving of the link between spatial origin and traditional manufacturing, by demonstrating the regional and traditional qualities of the product. Here cultural knowledge has to be transformed into a legal context – in order to describe the specification, information has to be collected, selected and arranged. Special local, historical, technical and cultural knowledge is thus necessary.

The putting into words of a 'traditional' practice requires the translation of experience into language which is standardised and internationally comparable.<sup>10</sup> Not every producer, or producer group, has the skills to perform such translation work. Superficially, the application seems to be open to everybody, but the burden of providing proof acts as a potential barrier, as there is a knowledge hierarchy among cheese makers, marketing directors, regional and ministerial officials, as well as between the actors from different areas.

In the Odenwald, the dairy was in charge of finding the necessary pieces of evidence for the PDO application. The owner remarked: 'We collected information. I had to bring

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. notes of the interview at the dairy company in Belluno, 18 June 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Welz, Gisela, 'Europäische Produkte: Nahrungskulturelles Erbe und EU-Politik. Am Beispiel der Republik Zypern', in Hemme Dorothee, Tauschek, Markus, Bendix, Regina, (eds.), *Prädikat "Heritage". Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen*, Berlin 2007, 324.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Welz, Gisela, 'Europäische Produkte. Nahrungskulturelles Erbe und EU-Politik. Am Beispiel der Republik Zypern', in Hemme Dorothee, Tauschek, Markus, Bendix, Regina, (eds.), *Prädikat "Heritage". Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen*, Berlin 2007, 331. Cf. also, Hegnes, Atle Wehn, 'Der Schutz der geographischen Nahrungsmittelherkunft in Norwegen als Übersetzungsprozess', in Bauer, Susanne, Bischof, Christine, Haufe, Stephan Gabriel, Beck, Stefan, Scholze-Irrlitz, Leonore, (eds.), *Essen in Europa. Kulturelle "Rückstände" in Nahrung und Körper*, Bielefeld 2010, 43-64.

documents, and then I had to describe how to make the cheese. What else? We met and discussed... But this was a very time-consuming procedure. On our own, we would not have made it.’<sup>11</sup> Finding suitable documents was complicated because, until then, the dairy had not been obliged to prove its traditional rootedness. In order to underline the traditional nature of the manufacturing process, a local historian contributed some certificates from the eighteenth century of which the dairy owner was then unaware. The selection of data and its submission was then completed by the ministry’s official. The results of this process can be viewed in the ‘Single Document’ that is published in the ‘Official Journal of the European Union’, which describes Frühstückskäse as a ‘Traditional product from the southern part of the Hessian Odenwald. Documents dating from the eighteenth century confirm that farmers in the Odenwald had to provide cheese to the respective feudal lord as part of the leasehold rent.’<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Piave, the dairy and the regional government worked together to provide proof that Piave was rooted in the area of Belluno and not in any other place. They did research on the Internet as well as in the archives of the historical dairy school, in local ethnographic museums, and in the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce. This research led to the rediscovery of some hitherto unknown historical documents which describe the methods of dairying in the region and the founding of the first dairy association.<sup>13</sup>

The proof of the link between spatial origin and traditional manufacturing has to be regarded as a construction. Research and application create a narrative of ‘how it really was’ by formulating a popular definition of a link that was not that obvious before. So, in case of Piave cheese, the locals emphasise, or rather repeat the link’s description from the ‘Single Document’ content, which notes that: ‘The production of Piave cheese has been handed down from generation to generation in the province of Belluno. Its origin dates from the end of the 19th century when the first rotating dairies were set up in mountain areas in Italy’,<sup>14</sup> – all aspects that are frequently mentioned in the interviews concerning the EU-protection of Piave PDO which I undertook.

The EU-system presupposes an awareness of a link between geographical and traditional aspects. As indicated, this consciousness might actually exist, but it also needs to be actively constructed during the application process. Arguing for this link often calls for further investigation and the creation of additional knowledge. In this context, the actors choose modes of research and selection, interpretation and contextualisation of information, subjectively. The applicants’ backgrounds influence the transformation of the (formerly) experienced, into juristically fixed knowledge, resulting in the specification, and the understanding, of the PDO-product in its ‘newly written but historically-founded’ dress.

### **Making People Associate a Product with a Particular Place**

Geographical indications are based on the assumption that products have characteristics which are identifiable by spatial origin. Therefore, it must be possible to associate the product with one particular place on the map. This place has to offer boundaries as well as certain distinguishing

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<sup>11</sup> Interview at the dairy in the Odenwald, 18 April 2012.

<sup>12</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/door/browse.html?display>, accessed 17 January 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. notes of the interview at the dairy company in Belluno, 18 June 2012.

<sup>14</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:234:0018:0022:EN:PDF>, accessed 17 January 2013. Cf. also the notes of the interview at the dairy company in Belluno on 18 June 2012.

characteristics, regardless of whether this ‘place’ is a region, a province or a valley, considering that all of these spatial categories are understood as constructed.

The area which is demarcated as Piave’s ancestral region corresponds to former fixed borders and covers the entire province of Belluno. According to the marketing director, this is the case mainly for practical reasons, even though the milk production at present does not extend across the total region.<sup>15</sup> The EU assumes that a product’s borders originate from a traditional and, thus also, from a geographical background. In the case of Piave, while the registered boundaries concur with this supposition, there is still an element of ‘border-making’ in this process, because the registered boundaries are not established by daily use.

In case of Odenwälder Frühstückskäse, the boundaries correspond to the area in which milk production used in the manufacture of the cheese is currently carried out. Thus, officially-accepted borders are neglected in order to mirror the product’s actual areas of production. The Hessian official stated: ‘I simply defined the region – Odenwald plus Bergstraße – because the milk suppliers are located in both districts. Ergo, it makes sense to extend the Odenwald [...] for purely practical reasons. That is the best procedure, because that is how I proceeded.’<sup>16</sup> Therefore, demarcating the ‘traditional production area’ of Odenwälder Frühstückskäse for a PDO was a one-man-decision based on an empirical approach referring to established networks.

Within these registered boundaries, the area has to offer certain characteristics. Some of them are defined by local actors during the application. For example, the area attributed to the Odenwälder Frühstückskäse is characterised by the altitude of the meadows which are 400 to 550 metres above sea-level, as well as precipitation levels, and the quality of the soil (poor and sandy).<sup>17</sup> Of course, such descriptions are inevitably reductive in terms of the actual complex geological, climatic and biological characteristics of the area.

Additional specifications in the PDO document refer to the current reputation of the area – which is difficult to prove and hard to pin down. This reputation, understood as an emotional component, is intentionally being constructed in Odenwald: There are local marketing campaigns underlining the naturalness of the region and describing the low mountain range as a ‘typical region for milk cattle’.<sup>18</sup> Its hills with grassland and thick forests are advertised as a perfect area for hiking and holidays. Constructing such characteristics enables the establishment of an image of Odenwald as a natural, but also as an agriculturally-structured area. Its food and handicraft are advertised using a common ‘regional brand’, and its rurality is portrayed as a retreat for residents of nearby cities.<sup>19</sup> This image supports the intention of local actors and the

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. notes of the interview at the dairy company in Belluno, 18 June 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Interview at the Hessian Department of Quality Protection in Giessen, 19 April 2012. A district (‘Kreis’ or ‘Landkreis’) is, in accordance with German local law, an association of local authorities (‘Gemeindeverband’). Several districts are situated in the area of the low mountain range Odenwald. The only one that is completely located within this area is the district of Odenwald (‘Odenwaldkreis’) which is the least populous district in Hesse. It borders on the district Bergstraße in the south-west and west.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/door/browse.html?display>, accessed 17 January 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Mohr, Cornelius, ‘Spezialitäten aus dem Odenwald’, in *Landwirtschaftliches Wochenblatt*, cf.: <http://www.lw-heute.de/?redid=30679>, accessed 17 January 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. <http://www.regionalmarke-odenwald.de>, accessed 17 January 2013, as well as the interview with the Slow Food Convivium Odenwald, Darmstadt, 17 April 2012.

EU to cause people to associate the product with one particular place. In addition, the application procedure and the status of being protected may prompt local actors to foster this image with the aim of transferring the Odenwald image on to the cheese.

Similarly, in Belluno, the local ‘Chamber of Industry and Commerce’ is attempting to enhance the region’s image by promoting the Dolomite Alps, a UNESCO world heritage site. The regional actors in policy and marketing are trying to focus more attention on local culinary specialties by means of such initiatives as a ‘road of cheese’ and the campaign ‘Veneto region – the land of cheeses’, because cheese was once an important source of income in the region.<sup>20</sup> Today, however, it is not the agricultural, but the industrial and touristic, sectors which are crucial.

Culinary practices and specialties not only derive from one area but they also create those areas as symbolic constructs.<sup>21</sup> In the context of the EU-protection system, it seems to be necessary for actors to prove, and thereby to create, a local or regional identity: ‘It is these cultural meanings that reinforce the sales value of the region and the regional products’,<sup>22</sup> as Karin Salomonsson has pointed out. Those who want to use a geographical indication as an economic or legal tool, cannot neglect to take on board the instrumentality of cultural arguments or the impact of cultural processes during application. Application strategies may differ between regions and according to EU pre-suppositions, but the gaining of the mark of origin PDO implies that cultural fragments and practices are instrumentalised. This is accompanied by an increase in symbolic capital.<sup>23</sup> This capital can then be exploited for the product’s sales and the area’s enhancement.

### **Effects – A Return to, or Rather the Creation of, Traditional Food?**

During the application procedure the product acquires a narrative based on nutritional, but especially, on ethnographic knowledge, as Bernhard Tschofen emphasises.<sup>24</sup> That narrative then creates changes in the perception of the producer, his product and its area of origin: Each narrative interprets the empirical practices surrounding the product and moves them into another context. Narratives provide and create structures, while proving the link between product and region creates special knowledge. This knowledge may actually change practices, processes, and perception.

The historical research undertaken by the Hessian actors, for instance, threw light on the current situation concerning Odenwälder Frühstückskäse. Several dairies were formerly

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Original in Italian: A.Pro,La.V. ‘la Regione Veneto, la terra da formaggi®’, undated brochure. Cf. <http://www.formaggisaporidolomiti.it>, accessed 17 January 2013. There is a ‘street of milk and cheese’ in Hesse as well: <http://www.milchundkaesestrassen.de/hessen>, accessed 17 January 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Cook, Ian, Crang, Philip, ‘The World on a Plate: Culinary Culture, Displacement and Geographical Knowledge’, in *Journal of Material Culture* 1 (1996): 140.

<sup>22</sup> Salomonsson, Karin, ‘The E-economy and the Culinary Heritage’, *Ethnologia Europaea* 32, no. 2 (2002), 135.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bendix, Regina, Hemme, Dorothee, Tauschek, Markus, ‘Vorwort’, in Hemme, Dorothee, Tauschek, Markus, Bendix, Regina, (eds.), *Prädikat “Heritage”. Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen*, Berlin 2007, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Tschofen, Bernhard, ‘Vom Geschmack der Regionen. Kulinarische Praxis, europäische Politik und räumliche Kultur – eine Forschungsskizze’, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 103 (2007): 184.

involved in the production of Odenwälder Frühstückskäse, but in the 1970s and 1980s, the other dairies formed co-operatives to cut costs. These co-operatives changed and modernised their product line and belittled the ongoing production of Frühstückskäse. The current owner reflected on past decisions as follows: ‘Why did we continue? Certainly not because we were so forward-thinking. It might be that we were rather antiquated. We never put our faith in progress. Especially my father – he never followed the trends. They laughed at him. But we continued to produce the outdated products, so we could stand out from the crowd. We stumbled on a niche, but that could not have been foreseen from the beginning.’<sup>25</sup>

The maintaining of a vintage product, and the passing on of methods of production from father to son, and noticing this only afterwards – these processes fit Hermann Bausinger's description of tradition as the ‘conscious cultivation of the transferred in its historical form’.<sup>26</sup> Tradition appears as actions that once were routine. It is only modernisation that re-evaluates tradition as something special which is worthy of selection and worthy of protection by the EU. Terms like tradition and heritage might suggest permanence and contingency. Instead their processuality has to be emphasised as Regina Bendix categorically states: ‘There is no cultural heritage, cultural heritage becomes.’<sup>27</sup> Heritage is a subsequently-acknowledged status. This status is based on negotiations and collective decisions.<sup>28</sup> If the existence of traditional food is presupposed within the EU-system, the registration of such a ‘traditional product’ causes various changes to occur that may make it permissible to talk about creating a different, a newly-delineated ‘traditional food’. Culinary heritage is a never-ending process of negotiation, modification and creation – as has been illustrated for the regions of Odenwald and Belluno.

### **Making ‘Traditional Food’ – European Benefit and Local Valuation**

Five hundred and fifty-eight products are now registered as PDO by the EU. The culinary diversity and regional specialties involved are part and parcel of European rhetoric, image and identity.<sup>29</sup> In the Odenwald, the product's visibility as an advertising medium is fairly extensive, the PDO designation less so: ‘The sign, the PDO sign, we promoted it a little, we talked about it. It had a good regional press when we received the certificate. I don't know if the customers understood, because this [sign] is always in need of explanation. But there certainly is one positive aspect, the product is highlighted. I think that the customers remember that there is a special product involved.’<sup>30</sup> The dairy owners assume that awareness and appreciation of the cheese will grow only if more regional products become EU-protected. This is confirmed by the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview at the dairy in the Odenwald, 18 April 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Bausinger, Hermann, ‘Tradition und Modernisierung’, *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 87 (1991): 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bendix, Regina, ‘Kulturelles Erbe zwischen Wirtschaft und Politik. Ein Ausblick’, in Hemme, Dorothee, Tauschek, Markus, Bendix, Regina, (eds.), *Prädikat “Heritage”. Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen*, Berlin 2007, 340.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Csáky, Moritz, Sommer, Monika ‘Vorwort’, in Csáky, Moritz, Sommer, Monika, (eds.), *Kulturerbe als soziokulturelle Praxis*, Innsbruck 2005, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Salomonsson, Karin, ‘The E-economy and the Culinary Heritage’, *Ethnologia Europaea* 32, no. 2 (2002):125; for the figure cf.:

<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/door/browse.html?display>, accessed 17 January 2013. In total there are 1138 protected products within the EU-protection system to date.

<sup>30</sup> Interview at the dairy in the Odenwald, 18 April 2012.

evaluation of the Hessian official, who stated: ‘For the dairy, not that much has changed. They use the sign on the leaflets and on the products without achieving any additional economic value. Hesse, by contrast, is the obvious winner: This [the protected cheese] is a flagship. We can present the product.’<sup>31</sup>

Both in Odenwald and in Belluno the products have gained in reputation but not in sales. In Belluno, a protection association is in charge of Piave since the beginning of 2012.<sup>32</sup> This association promotes and represents the cheese which is no longer in private ownership but is rather common property. Other dairies are waiting for admittance into the protection association so that they, too, can produce Piave cheese. Piave’s marketing director explains that there are several requests but that no other dairy has started producing the cheese as yet. He says that in a very matter of fact way.

In Odenwald, a protection association does not exist. Other potential producers are not that welcome: ‘Then we would have a problem’, remarks the dairy owner. On the other hand, he is sure that: ‘Even if we have to pass on our recipe to other cheese makers, they would not be able to manufacture the same cheese. We do not pride ourselves on that, but there is a lot of experience that cannot be put into words.’<sup>33</sup> Could there be more suitable words to highlight the limits of the EU-protection system?

The official registration of ‘traditional food’ can change how people perceive their culture and themselves. It could create a new consciousness for protected products highlight the regional practices as the discussion of the two cases above indicates. But above all they emphasise that the demarcation of culinary heritage and the protection afforded within the EU-system are always linked to acting subjects, who are making ‘traditional food’ according to their personal experience and empirical knowledge.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview at the Hessian Department of Quality Protection in Giessen, 19 April 2012.

<sup>32</sup> The office of the ‘Consorzio di Tutela del Formaggio Piave DOP’ is located in the dairy factory. The responsible employee worked for the dairy factory before the protection association was founded. Cf. notes of the interview at the dairy company in Belluno, 18 June 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Interview at the dairy in the Odenwald, 18 April 2012.